INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

"Yes, I'm Brave": Extraordinary Women in the Anishnaabe (Ojibwe) Tradition

Author(s): Theresa S. Smith

Source: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Spring, 1999, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 40-56

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of FSR, Inc

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002351

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002351?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

Indiana University Press and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"YES, I'M BRAVE"
Extraordinary Women in the Anishnaabe (Ojibwe) Tradition

Theresa S. Smith

> Bravery . . . is greatly valued by the Ojibwa. . . . Bravery does not refer to conduct in the fundamental activities of hunting, fishing, shamanism, or love-making. It is ideally a masculine feature, and is defined as the gallantry involved in risking life for something that is not vital to existence. . . Women who do the deeds of brave men on the war-path and at the give-away dance are called brave, as though they were men; although since women are not trained to these attitudes they have no deliberate incentive comparable to men's.
>
> She went along helping the people and she was paid well for she was very smart. The men were bringing back pemmican and buffalo hides to the Hudson's Bay Post. One time some men asked her with whom she had left her baby. She said that she had given it back to the father, and they answered that she was very brave to give away her baby. She said, "Yes, I'm brave. If there were anybody going to the Sioux country, I would go along."
>
> —Ruth Landes[1]

The construction of gender in culture and religion and the attention to and interpretation of gender roles are complex processes that necessitate the deconstruction of what Alice Kehoe has called the "organon" of gender, as well as a careful delineation between gender and sex.[2] Sex is a biological fact; gender is a social construct. Both determine, to some extent, the way in which cultures—

Research for this article was conducted in Toronto, Ontario, funded by a Canadian Studies Research Grant, and supported by the Centre for Feminist Research at York University. I express my appreciation to the Canadian Embassy and to York University and the University of Toronto for the use of their research facilities. I am also grateful to the members of the Native community of Toronto who participated as consultants, and to my friends and colleagues Jordan Paper, Cory Silverstein, Zeke Cywink, and especially Sherry Rowley for their assistance and encouragement. This article is lovingly dedicated to Susan, who understands what it is to be brave.

[1] Ruth Landes, *The Ojibwa Woman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 179, 144.

[2] Alice Kehoe, "Gender Is an Organon," *Zygon* 25, no. 2 (1990): 139–50.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and religions—mark and value their members. While biological determinism would have us believe that reproduction and child rearing universally circumscribe women's roles, the social construction of gender regularly transcends biology or, at the very least, overlays sex identity with structures of meaning and value. While gender as a constructed role or reality is indeed founded upon social interaction,[3] and not upon the instinctual recognition of physical "difference," gender constructs have a way of working themselves down to the deepest layers of consciousness, where they masquerade as intuitive "truths." As an organon, "an instrument of thinking, a logic," gender perpetuates the hierarchical classification of persons in sexist terms. Describing the Indo-European classification of languages into masculine, feminine, and neuter genders, Kehoe notes that "when gender is a feature of a language, its system of logic must be learned very early, and learned as a child first explores its world. Thus it becomes pervasive, its categories an inevitable and obvious part of the world. Gender becomes insidious."[4] The internalization of this classification system causes us to experience gender as self-evident, inescapable, somehow true, or even biologically given. Yet, as Kehoe observes, among the Blackfoot, sexual gender classification is understood not as necessary or natural but as arbitrary, just as it is among the Anishnaabeg and other Algonquian speakers whose language genders are animate and inanimate rather than masculine, feminine, and neuter.

The inapplicability of Western gender to the Native American language and lifeways and the fluidity of gender forms on this continent constitute an area that is, finally, being actively addressed by both Native and non-Native scholars. Much of the work has centered on the woman's role in Native American cultures and includes a critique of the sexist and racist assumptions that characterized earlier studies. Two areas are continually stressed regarding the ways in which Native American women understand themselves and the roles

[3] See, e.g. M. Z. Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs* 5, no. 3 (1980): 389–417. Rosaldo notes "socially determined variations" in gender roles, saying that "woman's place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less a function of what, biologically, she is) but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions. And the significance women assign to the activities of their lives are things that we can only grasp through an analysis of the relationships that women forge, the social contexts they (along with men) create—and within which they are defined" (400). Daniel Maltz and Joallyn Archambault, in "Gender and Power in Native North America: Concluding Remarks," in *Women and Power in Native North America*, ed. Laura Klein and Lillian Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 230–49, note that this emphasis on social interaction or behavioral roles within a society is unusually marked in Native North America: "What makes the Native North American case so interesting for the study of gender and power is that it is a region in which gender is central to the cultural system but not closely linked to either biology or power. . . . The gender concepts are tied to behavioral as opposed to biological differences" (231).

[4] Kehoe, 140.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that they choose to adopt and/or enact—those of complementarity and autonomy. Indeed, my own work in this area has concentrated upon the complementary character of female and male power and the importance of gender-specific rituals that access distinct yet coequal power for men and women.[5] And while I still believe that these are important and realistic emphases, I have begun to think that even these categories belie an insufficient and overly rigid understanding of gender, and specifically of women's roles in Native North America.

Returning for a moment to language and the cues it can provide regarding our internalized thought processes, it is worth noting that in the Ojibwe or Anishnaabe language, the gender categories of animate and inanimate exhibit a degree of fluidity. For example, depending upon the character of a stone—that is, its potential for animation or volition—and/or upon the speaker's attitude toward it, the word *stone* (*ahsin*) may be spoken as animate or inanimate.[6] The crucial test here is experience of the stone's behavior in the world. The same holds true in regard to the behavior of humans. While humans are always understood as animate, the sex-gendered roles of women and men exhibit a fluidity of form and content; once again, experience is the determinative factor.

The existence of people who "crossed" gender boundaries—the berdache and Amazon traditions found across Native North America—has been well documented, especially in the male case.[7] It should be noted that both of these terms are problematic, inasmuch as they are foreign to Native North American lifeways and carry with them some considerable cultural baggage. The usage of *berdache* is especially troubling, as it is derived from the Persian *bardaj* by way of the French *berdache* and refers to a "passive homosexual partner." It has also been burdened with an entirely negative European understanding of male homosexual practice.[8] Inasmuch as *berdache* has been used as a pejorative term and, along with *Amazon*, is not truly descriptive of the fluidity of sexual and gendered roles or identities in Native America, the idea of a "third gender" has been proposed to replace the terminology associated with the crossing of gender boundaries.[9] This would appear to make good sense, inasmuch as it is

[5] See, e.g., Theresa S. Smith, "Outcast Women: Some Mythic Images of Female Empowerment in Native North America," *Scholars* 4, no. 1 (1993): 4–11. Klein and Ackerman also include an emphasis on these categories. For a good overview of the foundational remedial work on Native women's cultural and spiritual roles, see Deborah Welch, "American Indian Women: Reaching beyond the Myth," in *New Directions in American Indian History*, ed. Colin Calloway (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 31–48.

[6] For a thorough treatment of the implications of animate and inanimate categories, see Theresa S. Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Lifeworld* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1995), 49–52.

[7] See Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

[8] Ibid., 9–11.

[9] Evelyn Blackwood, "Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females," *Signs* 10 (1984): 42.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

not clear that any such boundaries existed prior to contact with Europeans. Yet the notion of a third gender may be problematic.

Across North America, and specifically in the case of the Anishnaabeg, women who engaged in what were commonly seen as male pursuits were understood as extraordinary in many senses but not generally (with the exception of the Mojave *Hwame*) as unwomanly, despite the masculine descriptors attached to them. Further, as I will illustrate, it was not one type of behavior but a wide variety of behaviors that marked women as "braves." And many women—especially among the Anishnaabeg—engaged (and still engage) in these behaviors according to a fluid continuum of necessity and interest. Thus, I would suggest use of the word *extraordinary* in the simplest sense of being outside the ordinary or the mainstream to describe the activities and roles of "brave" women—and, for that matter, those of men heretofore named berdaches. For while it is true that there was no radical disjunction or boundary breaking of sex roles, all these Native Americans, in their wide variety, evidenced interests, behaviors, and, very often, accomplishments and powers that were judged to be more than mundane.[10]

I would add that the preferred term for many "extraordinary" persons in contemporary Native usage, *two-spirited*, is not always applicable to "brave" women, inasmuch as *two-spirited* refers directly to sexual orientation. And while brave women across North America were and are sometimes lesbian, heterosexuality—especially among the Anishnaabeg—did not and does not prevent a woman from adopting the extraordinary role. Sexuality, like gender, appears to exist on a continuum—a point that Evelyn Blackwood notes, especially in reference to the "wives" of lesbian extraordinary women: "Consequently, individuals possessed a gender identity, but not a corresponding sexual identity, and thus were allowed several sexual options. Sexuality itself was not embedded in Native American gender ideology."[11] The lamentable fact that homophobia now exists in Native communities is yet another indication of the effects of colonization and the internalization of Western, specifically Christian, values regarding sexuality.

Before we look at the case among the Anishnaabeg, it would be helpful to make some general contextual observations about the study and existence of extraordinary women across Native North America. Such a contextual framework is needed for two reasons. First, in seeking to understand Native North

[10] We must, of course, take care to place this distinction between the "mundane" and the "extraordinary" in context. By European standards, the "mundane" experience of the spirit world enjoyed by Native North Americans (via visions, dreams, and rituals) would appear "extraordinary." Without a reliance on a mediating religious institution, Native North Americans routinely approach the sources of the sacred directly, participating in that which Western religious traditions term "mysticism."

[11] Blackwood, 35–36.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

American lifeways, one is continually faced with the fact that this continent is characterized by indigenous religiocultural unity and diversity. By this I mean that while there is no such thing as Native American religion, and while there are literally hundreds of discrete Native religious traditions, this diversity is understood and experienced by contemporary Native people from within a pan-Indian context. Shared rituals like the sacred pipe, the sweat lodge, and increasingly the sun dance are cases in point. Moreover, this contemporary pan-Indianism is informed by the intuition of some traditional patterns of religious life, including, among other things, a respect for the natural world, an emphasis on healing and on oral teaching by elders, a commitment to rituals of sacrifice and initiation, and an emphasis upon direct experience, especially through visions or dreams. This unity of patterns also includes a respect for fluidity of social and religious roles, so it is important to illustrate that the Anishnaabe brave woman, while exhibiting a particular character, does not stand alone in Native North America.

Second, across North America, extraordinary women are identified and legitimated rather consistently by their behavior and/or competence rather than by their sexual orientation. Further, in some cases, in order for a woman to take on her extraordinary role, she must experience a legitimating dream. In the case of the Anishnaabeg, as I will illustrate, not only are both of these factors present, but often they appear to be entirely interrelated.

Certainly there is ample literature on the subject of extraordinary women in the anthropological record. As Blackwood notes, "Evidence from thirty-three Native American tribes indicates that the cross-gender role for women was as viable an institution as was the male berdache."[12] The fact that most study has concentrated upon extraordinary men is owed largely to the male bias that has characterized the work of ethnographers well into the second half of the twentieth century. Walter Williams, who wrote the groundbreaking study of extraordinary Native American men, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, while struggling against the homophobia in anthropology that discouraged his research, contends that the women whom he calls "amazons" had a "separate and distinct status" from their male counterparts. He goes on thus: "I realize that I as a male cannot address the topic as deeply as I have done with the berdache. Feeling strongly that fieldwork is at the base of such a study, and knowing as I do that much knowledge is only revealed by such persons to another of the same sex and orientation, I feel that the story of these amazons deserves its own study."[13] While Williams's reliance on field study has produced a remarkable work on the living reality of extraordinary Native North American men, I must question two assumptions here. First, while it is, admittedly, more difficult for a heterosexual man or even a gay man to access the lives of lesbians, not all extraordinary

[12] Ibid., 29. Interestingly, the Anishnaabeg are not included in this list.
[13] W. Williams, 11.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

women were or are lesbian (as I have noted and will illustrate shortly). Second, there is no reason to believe that historical study on extraordinary women cannot be effectively done by men—gay or straight—or by heterosexual women. In short, sexist and heterosexist biases often provide researchers with excuses rather than reasons for their decision to disregard potential areas of study.

A quick glance across North America provides a view of the huge variety of extraordinary roles open to and enacted by women. In the Southwest, the Mojave *Hwame* is frequently cited as the paradigmatic brave woman, especially inasmuch as she adopted male roles in all aspects of life.[14] The *Hwame* was said to have dreamed her role in the womb and took up the lifestyle of a boy during her childhood. *Hwames* were generally respected as good hunters, warriors, shamans, and sexual partners. In short, they appear to have been extraordinarily competent in mainstream male activities. The role of the *Hwame* was so fully accepted that Mojave society institutionalized it, providing an initiatory ritual that included the conferring of a name along with marriage rights (the *Hwame*'s wife retained the ordinary female status).[15] It was not until the effects of colonization had taken root that the *Hwame*'s status began to decline. The toxic effect of Western values regarding gender and sexuality finally resulted in the forceful rejection of this traditional and highly stable woman's role.[16]

On the plains, women also had extraordinary roles, acting as hunters and warriors, and, as in the Southwest, these roles were institutionalized. Among the Piegan, the "manly-hearted woman" enjoyed a powerful position and one that evidenced a great deal of flexibility in its interpretation. Here, however, women were not initiated as men, and there is no evidence that they were identified or understood themselves as consistently lesbian in their sexual orientation. These women were distinguished by their assertiveness and competence, and by the extraordinary amount of freedom (in comparison to ordinary women) that they enjoyed in a relatively patriarchal culture. They tended to be older women who owned extraordinary amounts of property and who were recognized for their ambition and their accomplishments as active and productive members of the tribe. Midnight Sun, in examining Oscar Lewis's study of manly-hearted women, draws the following conclusion: "The manly-hearted identity preserved the male-dominant structure of society by allowing a few specific women a

[14] See Blackwood and Ibid., as well as Midnight Sun, "Sex/Gender Systems in Native North America," in *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, ed. Will Roscoe (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 32–47; all include discussion of the *Hwame*, and all are dependent upon an ethnographic study by George Devereux, "Institutionalized Homosexuality of the Mohave Indians," *Human Biology* 9, no. 4 (1937): 498–527.

[15] Devereux, 508–9.

[16] "While cross-gender roles continued to exist at the time of Devereux's study, their form was markedly different and cultural attitudes toward them had become disparaging, in conformity with western attitudes. The Mojave had begun to view such individuals as 'somewhat crazy,' and families were ashamed to have one as a member" (Midnight Sun, 39, quoting Devereux, 502).

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

narrowly defined gender role in which to enact non-feminine characteristics, while continuing to be married."[17]

While Midnight Sun's point is well taken regarding the relatively patriarchal character of social structure on the plains, we must note that a contrast is being made here to explicitly matrifocal cultures, specifically those of the Pueblo. Certainly in comparison to Western patriarchal society, the Plains tribes were not strongly patriarchal at all, and one cannot discount entirely the contention that where patriarchy existed in Native America, not only was it of a different character than Western models, but it also might have been a late (i.e., postcontact) development.[18] Furthermore, in stressing the married status of the manly-hearted woman, we should be aware that a woman's participation in a heterosexual marriage is not necessarily an indication that she did not identify herself as lesbian. As Williams notes, sexuality in traditional (i.e., non-Christianized) Native America was not a subject of judgment, but neither was it a subject of much discussion; it was considered one's private business.[19] Yet all indications are that whatever each woman's own private affectional or sexual orientation might be, as far as the society was concerned the manly-hearted women, unlike the *Hwames*, were understood, as a group, to act as ordinary wives and mothers who evidenced extraordinary abilities and influence.

That sexuality was not a deciding factor in the assumption of extraordinary gender roles is furthered evidenced when one looks at women who were not categorized as manly-hearted. Certainly there were warrior women like the famous Blackfoot Running Eagle, who appear to have been closer to the *Hwames* in "male" pursuits and, more likely than not, in sexual orientation. As James Schultz describes her, Running Eagle took on the responsibility of parenting her siblings after the deaths of her mother and father. She adopted a warrior's role, lived with another woman, declared that she would never marry a man and thus compromise her independence, and gained great respect as a

[17] Midnight Sun, 45. See Oscar Lewis, "The Manly-Hearted Women among the North Piegan," *American Anthropologist* 43 (1941): 173–87.

[18] See, e.g., Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

[19] W. Williams, 248. Williams quotes Paula Gunn Allen's poem "Beloved Women" (in "Lesbians in American Indian Cultures," *Conditions* 7 [1981]: 73):

> It is not known if those
> who warred and hunted on the plains . . .
> were Lesbians
> It is never known
> if any woman was a lesbian
> so who can say . . .
> And perhaps the portents are better
> left written only in the star . . .
> Perhaps all they signify is best left unsaid.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

hunter and warrior: "The general opinion of the camp was . . . [that] she was neither to be judged nor governed by tribal laws regarding women. She was to be honored and respected for what she had done."[20] While we know nothing explicit about Running Eagle's sexual orientation, and while she did not enjoy the kind of institutionalized role that the *Hwame* did, Running Eagle's relationship with her partner, Suya'ki, was certainly a functional "marriage." And when Lewis calls Running Eagle a "virgin woman warrior," one must wonder whether "virgin" is not code for "lesbian."

An entirely different case on the plains is seen in the persons of the Lakota *witkowin*, women who dreamed of the Double-Faced Woman and were thus freed of the ordinary sexual restraints of marriage. These women were understood to be promiscuous and "crazy" (especially inasmuch as they were also frequently thunder-dreamers), but their behavior was sanctioned because of their dreaming.[21] Their promiscuity appears to have been heterosexual in character, and while they were said to "do work like a man," they were also extraordinarily skilled in ordinary women's pursuits, like quillwork.[22] They were known to behave unpredictably, but although men expressed a certain amount of fear regarding what they saw as the mysterious character of the *witkowin*'s power, that power was neither questioned nor demonized: "Whoever behaves in this way seems to be crazy but then everything she makes is very beautiful. Well so it is. They believe them to be *wakan* (sacred)."[23]

In short, be they extraordinarily competent, confident wives, extraordinarily skilled hunters and warriors, or women who dreamed in extraordinary ways and acted on those dreams, Plains women were valued according to how well they enacted the roles that they were given or that they chose. The indicator of an extraordinary woman was not same-sex orientation, the crossing of gender boundaries, or the challenging of the social structure but the enactment of choice within a flexible, even organic cultural matrix. In this overview, the only consistent prerequisite for societal sanction that appears to have applied is that a woman be skilled at whatever role she chose. Yet while performance seems to have been the telling variable, dreaming may have provided the impetus in some cases.

Among the Anishnaabeg, both competence and the sacred sanction of the dream played a part. The reliance on performance is readily evident, for here we see women adopting the extraordinary role of the brave out of necessity as

[20] James W. Schultz, *Running Eagle: The Warrior Girl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 177.

[21] Beatrice Medicine, "Warrior Women—Sex Role Alternatives for Plains Indian Women," in *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, ed. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1983), 272.

[22] James Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 165–66.

[23] Ibid., 166.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

well as choice, and being variably judged according to how well they fulfilled a given role at a given time. This pattern, clearly illustrated in the case studies included in Ruth Landes's *The Ojibwa Woman*, is still evident in the lives of contemporary Anishnaabe women. Published in 1938, Landes's field study suffers from both the self-imposed editorializing of Christianized informants and from the author's own Western biases regarding Native lifeways and women's roles. Yet in spite of its limitations, Landes's book presents a startling wealth of examples of extraordinary women who, as hunters and warriors, were given the honorific title of brave (*ogitcida*, literally "great heart"). Landes discusses a total of twenty-four women whom she calls not only "extraordinary" but also "abnormal" and "queer." To understand the biases that permeate her work, we need also to appreciate Landes's reliance upon discredited interpretations of Ojibwe culture and religion. Only then may we appreciate the full scope and depth of the life stories upon which *The Ojibwa Woman* is constructed.

Landes contends that traditional Anishnaabeg understood the newborn as essentially "empty of characteristics and identity" and that boys were encouraged, even forced, to "fill" this emptiness with the help of guardian spirits.[24] It is inaccurate to speak of "emptiness" here, because babies were understood to be unformed rather than soulless. In fact, dream catchers were attached to the cradleboard in order to prevent any harm to a baby's soul and/or the theft of that soul. Additionally, the baby's umbilical cord was preserved in a case that was suspended from the cradleboard in the belief that the cord would help to secure wisdom for the child.[25] Even more problematic, however, is Landes's insistence that only males felt pressure to develop a self: "All of this great pressure to secure personal qualities is leveled directly upon the male; it is he preeminently whose personality is of importance. As we have seen, women are given little consideration culturally. To women are allotted the quiet, sedentary, and domestic occupations that are not dependent upon supernatural gifts" (124).

One cannot but wonder at the Victorian image of the woman that Landes paints here, especially given her observation of the active lives of women—even those whom she sees as quite ordinary. Throughout, her descriptions are marred by a divided and inconsistent interpretation of the "proper" woman's role. Across North America and among the Anishnaabeg, women were understood to be "whole" persons by virtue of their ability to give birth. Their wholeness did not and does not preclude women's visionary experiences, and in fact Landes discusses many such experiences. However, she includes these experiences and the life stories of female shamans under the rubric of "extraordinary," including at least five shamans in her case studies.

[24] Landes, *Ojibwa Woman* (cited in n. 1), 124. Hereafter, this source will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[25] Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 86 (Washington, D.C., 1929); reprint, Minnesota Historical Society (1979), 51.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

It is difficult to understand how Landes was left with the impression that women did not and do not act as medicine people, though one source of her confusion might be the degree to which her Christianized "informants" rejected shamanism (especially in the *midewiwin*, a medicine society that shows the effects, in some areas, of Christianization) as sorcery. In addition, Landes worked extensively with male shamans in her own study of the *midewiwin*.[26] The effects of Christianization included a characteristically Western emphasis on "proper" ritual, on doctrine, and on women's roles. Yet within and without the *midewiwin*, women continued to act as powerful agents. When Shirley Williams describes her own *mide* participation, for instance, she notes that while the men build the sweat lodge, it is a woman who "ties the first two saplings." Further, the woman who distributes water within the teaching lodge is no serving "squaw" but a sacramental agent, dispensing a symbol of cleansing and life: "In any ceremony a woman performs, there is always the celebration of life. Therefore, the role of women, whether as leaders of ceremonies, as workers, or as mothers, is very important."[27]

Additionally, Landes's misunderstanding of menstruation and childbirth leads her to conclude that "women, because of their harmful blood discharges, must be kept from contact with bountiful supernaturals" (124). The idea that menstrual blood pollutes is another misconception that has been entirely discredited across North America. The menstrual blood is not defiling but powerful, and its power demands that one treat it with respect—the religious watchword of Native America. This respect includes, contrary to many early ethnographic accounts, a recognition of the positive and curative aspect of the menses. In fact, in some tribal contexts, the menstruating woman may be the most effective shaman of all.

Among the Anishnaabeg, the menstruating woman, while rarely confining herself to a menstrual hut (though women may indeed do so to access spirits and to balance themselves during this powerful time), restricts herself from certain activities. Menstruating women do not dance at powwows, for example, and it is not uncommon for the master of ceremonies at such a gathering to announce that a particular woman is "on her moon" and therefore declines to participate in the dance. The public announcement of one's menstrual period would no doubt be a source of humiliation for a Euro-American woman. Here

[26] Ruth Landes, *Ojibwa Religion and the Midewiwin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).

[27] Shirley Williams, "Woman's Role in Ojibway Spirituality," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no. 3 (1992): 102. See also Priscilla Buffalohead, "Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women," *Minnesota History* 48, no. 6 (Summer 1993): 236–44. Buffalohead contradicts Landes's contention (in *Ojibwa Woman*, 177) that *tcisaki*, or "shaking tent shamanism," was never practiced by women, citing the example of the highly respected nineteenth-century *tcisaki* Blue Robed Cloud.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

instead it is greeted with approbation, for the announcement is, in effect, that a certain woman is in a special state of great power. Further, the menstruating woman should not touch a dancer's staff or a shaman's belongings nor work on any dance costume or medicine, for her power might short-circuit the power that inheres in ritual objects. Just as it can be deadly for lightning to strike electrical systems, it can be harmful for one type of sacred power or energy (the object) to be placed into contact with another, more potent force (the menstruating woman).

These are just two examples of the way in which Landes, by imposing Euro-American gender assumptions on Anishnaabe women, distorts the reality of this life-world. In her conclusion to the chapter on women's occupations, Landes asserts: "If men are thought of as the specialized instruments of Ojibwa culture, women are the unspecialized; if men are considered the inheritors of the culture's wealth, women are the dispossessed and underprivileged; if men are the material selected arbitrarily to be the finest medium for the expression of Ojibwa ideals, women are second-rate, or perhaps reserve, material" (177). Landes's work could be dismissed as simply one more disheartening racist, sexist interpretation, except for two considerations: her work has been pivotal in the study of the Anishnaabeg, providing a corpus upon which later, largely corrective studies have been based; and, freed of her interpretations, the words of her informants still speak volumes about Anishnaabe culture in the early part of the twentieth century. I should also note that even within the context of her often ill-considered remarks, Landes does sometimes point the way to a fuller understanding of how and why women adopted extraordinary roles. For example, she concedes that the Anishnaabeg, like the other Native North Americans I have discussed, had above all a "respect for ability" (135), and that this respect allowed for a wide variety in women's roles.

But where Landes sees this allowance being made because women were too unimportant to be considered possible societal disrupters (i.e., freedom came out of a benign neglect), I understand that freedom to have existed within a societal context that affirmed the value and power of women. Part of that power was volitional and evidenced in many ways, including in the right of any woman to leave a husband who threatened or displeased her. Landes includes at least six women in this category. It is interesting that she finds this respect for a woman's will to be extraordinary, reflecting, perhaps, the difficulty of enacting such a choice in Landes's own early-twentieth-century culture. In all fairness I should add, however, that Landes does not emphasize the woman's leaving so much as her ability to survive on her own when necessity—through either separation or widowhood—demanded it. Such was the case of Kota, who married a total of eight times and "while she was single . . . continued to maintain herself by hunting, trading, fishing, and shamanism" (165). Another woman, Red Earth Woman, deserted by her first husband, chose to renounce men entirely and never remarried. Landes quotes one of her informants: "This decision made it

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

necessary for her to supply herself with goods ordinarily supplied by a husband. She lived up to the occasion, 'and killed lots of muskrats, as she was just like a man'" (164). It is worth noting that while Landes's informant says that Red Earth Woman was "just like a man," the description is not entirely accurate. She did indeed perform all the tasks that a man would (especially hunting), but one assumes that she also performed all the requisite female tasks as well. In other words, when Anishnaabe women are described as behaving like men, this is not, as Landes would have us believe, an "unsexing" of the woman or even a crossing of gender boundaries. Rather, women like Red Earth Woman appended additional (male) social roles upon the female natures and roles they continued to embody and enact.

Landes says that Anishnaabe girls grew up observing the acceptability of unconventional roles for women. I have already said that shamanism was not, in fact, an unconventional role; I would also maintain that the exercise of choice in marriage and the ability to survive were not extraordinary in the Anishnaabe context. Yet even excepting these cases, Landes does provide us with several examples of women who were seen as truly extraordinary—those who earned the honorific title of *ogitcida*, or brave. Again, some women chose to behave as braves and willingly took on the warrior role, while others responded to necessity. In every case the woman was judged upon her performance. Two women who chose the warrior role—but for distinctly different reasons—were Chief Earth Woman and Cocos.

Chief Earth Woman fell in love with a married man and decided to accompany him into battle with the Sioux. When her mother discovered her absence, she was relatively untroubled, as she assumed that the young woman had had a legitimating dream. Landes's informant recounts the tale:

> And as they went along, and when they stopped at dinner time, the leader told all the men to *manito kazo* [commune with the spirit helpers]. Then he asked the girl if she had come because she knew of something to help her through. She did not answer anything, but started to *manito kazo*, making a speech about a little wren. That was the best thing to have a dream of, especially for war. So the leader said it was all right for her to go. (142)

Although Chief Earth Woman did not kill any Sioux in the ensuing battle, she did scalp one warrior. More importantly, her dreaming protected her party from ambush and finally led them to the three Sioux whom they were tracking. The party returned singing of victory and praising Chief Earth Woman's participation. At the victory dance she received a feather—the mark of the brave—along with all the other new warriors.

For Cocos, the entry into the warrior role was both more complex and more difficult, and her story tells us a good deal about true bravery. As a young girl, Cocos survived a Sioux attack in which her brothers and grandmother were

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

killed. She had grown up watching her mother engage in various acts of aggression: "'When she was small she often saw her mother fighting her father, and also, many times she saw her fighting other women, or cutting another woman's face because she was jealous. She used to think her mother was brave for doing these things, but she wondered why she was always fighting with someone'" (148).

Between her mother's violence and her own traumatic narrow escape from the Sioux, Cocos had no romantic illusions about aggressive behavior. She was close to her father, and when she was grown, she agreed to accompany him on a raid in order to avenge the deaths of her siblings and grandmother. Her mother was also invited but declined, so Cocos accompanied her father and forty braves into Sioux territory. Like Chief Earth Woman, she dreamed both before and during the campaign: "'Often she was afraid, even though she knew by her dreams that she was safe; and she was afraid for some of the men. But she would not turn back, as she would get the name of a coward'" (150). The ensuing battle was successful; Cocos took two Sioux scalps and the genitals of one Sioux warrior. During the victory dance, Cocos did something that showed she had internalized a mature understanding of bravery: "'She had in her hand the genitals which she had cut off, and she threw them at her mother. "Here, take this! This is the kind of thing for which you used to fight and quarrel. You used to cut women's faces and pull their hair over it! Keep it! I brought it for you! I used to think you were brave when I saw you fighting (with rivals)!"'" (151).

Some years later, Cocos gave a speech to the Sioux (with whom her band had now made peace), boasting about her exploits. We are told that upon hearing the tale, "'they (the Sioux) were not mad, but they knew that she was brave'" (151). Although Cocos chose to go to war, her story shows the impetus of necessity as well, for she felt obligated to aid her father and thus to act as a responsible family member. The fact that Cocos never again went to war is further indication that she was discharging a duty as well as choosing to act in an extraordinary way.

Some Anishnaabe women had less choice. Circumstance sometimes placed women in a position wherein they were forced to behave as braves. Companionable Woman found herself in such a situation when the small group of four families with whom she was camping was attacked by the Sioux. Companionable Woman, a widow who took care of her two children, was known as a smart woman because of the skills she demonstrated in the bush. One night she had a premonition or dream that an attack was imminent, and with her children and some women who were staying with her, she escaped:

> They all ran through the bush, and finally got into her canoe. (Under her leadership) they went up the river and around the Point, and they saw a canoe on the shore with a loaded gun in it. They knew it was the Sioux canoe. Companionable Woman took the gun and shot holes in the

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> canoe and shoved it out and it sank. . . . All at once one man dived into the water and swam towards them, so Companionable Woman shot him in the head and killed him. (171)

Companionable Woman took the women and children to a safe place and returned to the wigwams two more times in search of survivors and supplies. She collected more survivors and kept the party together on an island until it was safe for them to travel to a nearby camp. Companionable Woman even collected the scalps of the Sioux who had been slain in the raid, and she took these to the subsequent war dance. She was given the title of *ogitcida* and "used to have a feather on her head to show how brave she was" (172). Companionable Woman's behavior was extraordinary—especially because she did not fight and hide just to save herself and her family but made repeated forays into a dangerous place. Her initial actions were in keeping with her reputation as a smart woman. Her subsequent behavior made her a brave.

In all these stories there is a common thread—a dream or vision precedes the woman's entry into bravery and often continues to inform her throughout her activity. The importance of this spiritual aspect cannot be overestimated, for when the spirit helpers are ignored, disaster follows. This was the case with the unnamed woman who spoke the words, "Yes, I'm brave," in response to the men who marveled at her ability to give her baby away. This woman had lost most of her family and bore a child as the result of a rape by her Métis employer. She left the child with him and set off on her own, eventually joining a war party headed for Sioux territory. This woman had had no legitimating dream, so although the male warriors were impressed by her sacrifice, they did not respect her desire to go to war. Though her previous actions had shown bravery, without the guidance of a spirit helper the woman was ill prepared for battle. When the battle began, she simply ran and hid in a hole. While she was hiding, a bear crawled into the hole with her. What follows is the remarkable story of a spirit helper (*manitou*) who took pity on the woman and so allowed her to be brave:

> She knew the bear wanted her to go somewhere so she followed. It seemed to be in no great hurry. . . . It would look at her, then would run, so she ran too and finally they came to a lake where there were canoes. The bear threw one into the water and gave her a paddle, and pushed her into the canoe and out into the water. She started paddling as hard as she could. When she looked back the bear was tearing up all the remaining canoes and breaking the paddles in half, and just as he was tearing up the last canoe, the Sioux men came running down, yelling. The bear ran away along the shore, as fast as he could, in the same direction she was travelling. Of course the Sioux did not have any canoe in which to follow her; they just had to stand on the shore and watch her escape. When she came to a rapids the bear was already there waiting for her. She was frightened because she didn't know what It meant by this. Then

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> she remembered that when she was a little girl she used to dream (spontaneously) about a big bear which went around with her and protected her from everything. Then (with new confidence) she got out. (146)

The bear continued to help the woman until she found a band of Anishnaabeg with whom she settled, eventually marrying and giving birth to a daughter. When the daughter was three years old, a bear attacked the child and killed her in front of her mother, who, overcome with grief and guilt, hanged herself.

The guilt that the woman felt came from her neglect of ritual offerings that were owed to the bear on account of its service to her. The mutuality required in the spirit-human relationship is much like that which characterizes the grandparent-grandchild relationship. There is a shared dependency here, and the woman's attempt to engage in a unilateral relation sealed her fate. Why she would behave with such disrespect and foolishness is a question that Landes answers through reference to the "second-class" status of women: "Offerings are usually the responsibility of men because in general they have the important visions and sacred powers. . . . The heroine had powers that are conventionally masculine, but she had not had the training for the behavior that validated them" (148). According to Landes, such training was simply not given to girls at all. This is a curious assumption on three counts. First, the young woman had received little training of any kind because she was orphaned at an early age and spent her youth with a Métis family. Second, she had been on her own throughout her adulthood until the time of her marriage and had had little experience with reciprocal relations of any kind. Third, Landes notes that a sister-in-law blamed the woman for the death of the child and that "the sister-in-law's hatred was occasioned by the girl's having failed to keep in ritual contact with her guardian bear by making regular respect offerings of sugar" (147). Clearly, the sister-in-law was well aware of the need for ritual offerings to spirit helpers despite the fact that she was a woman.

The tragedy in this story is inescapable, for here was a woman who was brave but who, when she chose to neglect the source of bravery—the bear—forfeited all that she had. The male warriors had judged her on two occasions, first favorably (in sacrificing the child and setting out on her own) and then unfavorably (in going to war without engaging in *manito kazo*). In the social realm it was, again, the woman's performance, rather than her gender, that counted. But there is another layer that needs to be explored in the Anishnaabe context. While my introductory overview of extraordinary women among other Native North American tribes yielded a similar societal reliance upon competence as key to the acceptability of out-of-the-ordinary behaviors, in the Anishnaabe case this societal level appears to have been consistently dependent upon spiritual sanction. This is true at least in the stories of *ogitcidak* (braves) who, without exception and like their male counterparts, dreamed and actively sought the assistance of the *manitouk* (spirit helpers). Without a spirit helper, bravery simply could not be achieved.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Landes's contention that women did not access powers—or at least important powers—is contradicted by the material she presents. While successful warriors—both female and male—dreamed, before a raid, of small, quick spirits like hummingbirds or wrens, interestingly, six of the women whom Landes cites also had encounters with a specific spirit—the bear. Makwa, or Bear, was considered to be one of the most powerful *manitouk* and was associated with courage, the earth, and the *midewiwin*. It was Bear who brought the sacred *Megis* shell up from the earth and who stood at the entrance to the *mide* lodge. Additionally, bears were held in such high regard that they might be accorded funerals like human beings.[28] The possible connection between extraordinary women and Bear, and the special spiritual sanction that it might imply, is a subject worthy of further exploration. In any case, while societal acceptance of women as braves did indeed depend upon performance, the social realm rested upon the foundation provided by the *manitouk*. Without roots in that religious ground, neither women nor men could grow. And no matter how fluid the gender roles, without a connection to spirit this fluidity would become a meaningless pattern of failure. The only "queer" members of traditional Anishnaabe society were those who had lost the connection to the power realm through negligence of their spirit relations.

This sense of interconnectedness with the natural (including human) and the supernatural worlds is common throughout Native North America. The Anishnaabeg, like many Native Americans, envision and express this connection as a wheel or circle in which all directions have particular identities and powers. In the social as well as the cosmic realm, the strength and unity of the circle depends upon the presence and participation of each point along its circumference. Among the Anishnaabeg, the brave women stood out, but they were never cast from the circle of the society—nor did they break that circle. Instead, they made the permeable and fluid circle a bit larger. Whether any of these women were two-spirited or not is not discernible from Landes's text, but we may assume, given the Anishnaabe attitude toward a woman's freedom and control in sexual matters, that some were. More importantly, we must assume that sexual orientation here, as elsewhere in Native America, was not an important factor in how the gender of these women was understood and valued. Landes maintains that "occupationally diverse women must be individuals of great courage and resource, or of great ignorance of the cultural demands"

[28] See Maude Kegg, *Portage Lake: Memories of an Ojibwe Childhood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 173–74: "Long ago when we were living at Portage Lake, all of a sudden, somebody, I don't know who, came over. 'It's going to be over there,' my grandmother said. . . . 'There's to be a funeral.' . . . Then I looked the other way and there it was, a bear's head. The bear was just huge and was all decorated with ribbons. There were a lot of dishes around in there. An old man spoke, but I don't remember what he said. It was just like somebody died, a regular funeral."

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

(163). I maintain that they were extraordinarily brave women who understood both cultural demands and cultural opportunities. The roles they chose did not unsex them, nor did those roles somehow move them over into a third gender. Rather, the brave women were judged on their performance and validated by their connections to the spirit realm. That they were accorded titles ordinarily given to male warriors does not indicate that they were "unwomanly." It shows that they expanded their already considerable social and spiritual powers into areas ordinarily, but never exclusively, inhabited by men. Exclusivity and rigidity are prerequisites to the erecting of barriers and to the constructing of compartments. The circle is a pan-Indian symbol that denies the need for such constructions and affirms the intuition that balance, not control, ensures social and cosmic stability.

Tremolo

A woman is making the tremolo into the wind
No longer is it the song she once made
For her husband and her sons in battle
Now
She sings it for herself
This woman is a strong woman
Her face is etched in lines
That have not yet made an ending
In another time she would be called "man-hearted"
But now she has turned her back to the wind
and the four winds take her cry and carry
it to the four directions, to all-women
And her tremolo is a new song
She sings in a voice of rolling thunder
Saying,
Listen, women! The new word for *strong*
is "*Woman-hearted*!"

—Joan Shaddox Isom (Cherokee)[29]

[29] Joan Shaddox Isom, "Tremolo," in *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women*, ed. Beth Brant (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand, 1988), 226.

This content downloaded from
63.233.192.60 on Sat, 02 Jul 2022 02:19:18 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms